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Soviet SALT, Trade Desires Swell Hopes of Dissidents

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MOSCOW — In the small apartments where dissidents gather, the conversation now is about who will be released from prison next.

Since last Friday's Soviet-U.S. exchange of two convicted Soviet spies for five imprisoned dissidents, there have been persistent rumors that the two most famous Soviet human rights activists still jailed — Anatoly Shcharansky and Yuri Orlov — will soon be released.

Some Western diplomats, who usually resist predictions about Soviet behavior, suspect that this could take place about the time Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and President Carter are expected to meet.

Other rumors center on the three men still in prison for their role in an abortive attempt to flee the country by hijacking a plane in Leningrad in 1970. Nine others have been released, two of them in last week's swap. Dissident leader Andrei Sakharov has now appealed to Brezhnev to release Yosif Mendelevich, Yuri Fyodorov and Alexei Murzhenko.

Some dissidents seem to believe they could be free by this weekend.

THIS WAVE OF optimism is inspired by the conviction that the Soviet Union has begun a campaign to improve its image and thus the chances for approval of the forthcoming Salt II treaty in the U.S. Senate.

Evidence of such a campaign is found in last week's exchange, the earlier release of several of the jailed Leningrad hijackers, and the record pace of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. Jews are now departing at a rate of almost 50,000 a year.

The Soviet government has said nothing in public to confirm that a campaign is under way.

In fact, the Soviet press has said nothing about the swap. At a press conference last weekend during the visit of French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the head of the Soviet Communist Party's information department, Leonid Zamyatin, at first tried to avoid answering a question about the exchange.

He then said it was simply a case of some people wanting to leave the Soviet Union and others wanting to return.

Asked if such exchanges could improve the atmosphere for the SALT treaty, Zamyatin insisted, "The Soviet Union has never linked SALT to any other question."

SALT IS CLEARLY an important factor in recent Soviet policy decisions. But Western diplomats feel certain that the swap was an end in itself for Moscow. The Soviets wanted their spies. They were furious when the two agents were arrested in New Jersey, claiming the United States had broken the unwritten rules of espionage, which called only for expelling the men.

Expecting a swap, the Soviets said little about the trial until the agents were sentenced to 50 years imprisonment. Then the Kremlin's propaganda organs set up a thunder of demands that the two "diplomats" be returned immediately to the Soviet Union.

Moscow was ready for an exchange from the beginning, and the prolonged negotiations with Washington centered on which dissidents the Soviets would release.

The United States wanted Shcharansky but was unable to get Moscow to agree. The timing of the swap, then, depended on U.S. acceptance of a Soviet list. As diplomats here point out, the Carter administration is just as eager as the Kremlin to see SALT II ratified.

The Soviet Union has also made it clear that its immediate objectives in relations with the United States go further than the SALT treaty. For the past year Moscow has been engaged in an all-out drive for most-favored-nation trading status.

THE SOVIET PRESS has kept up a steady barrage of denunciation of Congress, charging that it is pushing "discriminatory trade legislation." Kremlin officials have overtly lobbied every visiting senator and congressman on the issue.

Since the key legislation, the Jackson-Vanik amendment, links Soviet emigration policy to trade relaxation, many experts believe that the record flow of Jewish emigrants is actually focused on most-favored-nation status. These analysts assume that because China is likely to be granted that status soon, the Soviets are determined not to be left out again.

Like SALT, China is a dominant factor in Soviet policy. Watching the warming of relations between Peking and Washington and worrying about possible arms sales to China by Western European countries, the Kremlin's policymakers apparently decided to brighten up their image. If the West is moving toward China because of the "Soviet threat," the Kremlin seems to be saying, then the Soviet Union will take steps to appear less threatening.